



Remembering Professor Sudarshan Seneviratne (1949-2024): The Personal is Political

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Sudarshan Seneviratne was not merely my greatest mentor and a guiding presence throughout my academic journey; his influence profoundly shaped my life. I first encountered Uncle Sudarshan, as I fondly called him, when I was about ten years old. Already distinguished as a professor of archaeology at the University of Peradeniya, he later occupied the singular chair in archaeology within Sri Lanka's university system. Tall and charismatic, his presence radiated warmth, underscored by a playful twinkle in his eye. His encyclopedic knowledge traversed disciplines—archaeology, history, politics, literature, and music—marking him as a genuine Renaissance man whose intellectual prowess matched his profound affection for his students and his craft.

His approach to archaeology and heritage management was revolutionary, emphasizing inclusivity and the dynamic vitality of history. Profoundly influenced by his doctoral studies under Professor Romila Thapar at Jawaharlal Nehru University, he formulated the innovative concept of 'social archaeology'. For Seneviratne, archaeological sites were not merely inert relics; rather, they were active spaces capable of sparking contemporary dialogues and understanding. The Jetavana site in Anuradhapura vividly exemplified his archaeological philosophy. Under his discerning leadership, what had conventionally been perceived solely as a religious monument revealed itself as a vibrant testament to Sri Lanka's multicultural legacy. Excavations unveiled Hindu statues, Tamil inscriptions, and artifacts from distant lands, confirming the site as a thriving hub of international trade and cultural exchange. As he eloquently articulated in *Himal*, "The discovery of West Asian ceramics and large quantities of imported ceramics and raw material for beads only



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further bespeak of the multicultural and multi-religious character of the Jetavana site” (Seneviratne, 2007, para. 30).

Seneviratne’s pioneering view of heritage as soft power further enriched both scholarship and diplomacy. Serving as Sri Lanka’s High Commissioner to India from 2014-2016 and subsequently to Bangladesh from 2020-2023, he deftly translated his academic insights into diplomatic practice. His own decade-long education in India uniquely positioned him to prioritise cultural connections and shared heritage over political divisions. In his notable 2019 keynote address titled “Heritage and Silent Diplomacy as Soft Power” at the University of Kelaniya, he assertively proclaimed, “The region itself does not require third-party peace merchants from outside the region or their subalterns in the region to educate us on our shared legacy and the value of mutual respect for each other” (p. 21).

Throughout his illustrious career, education consistently emerged as his chosen catalyst for social transformation. To Seneviratne, archaeology represented far more than excavation—it was an essential tool for conflict resolution, especially crucial in the context of post-war Sri Lanka. He argued passionately for archaeology and heritage studies as instruments capable of dismantling narrow-minded nationalism, emphasising that “archaeology and heritage studies are perhaps the best avenues to rectifying the process of cultural plurality, and de-mythologizing all forms of parochialism in a scientific manner, by placing alternative histories before the next generation for a more rational understanding of the past” (Seneviratne, 2007, para. 26). This unyielding dedication ensured he never permitted archaeological evidence to be appropriated for exclusivist or nationalist agendas.

His approach to mentoring was deeply personal –a quality I experienced intimately. From an early age, he generously shared his intellectual pursuits, subtly guiding my understanding along paths whose destinations I only recognised retrospectively. His thoughtful reading suggestions, rich with delayed revelations, demonstrated his extraordinary patience and nurturing wisdom. Over the years, our intellectual exchanges evolved into a reciprocal dialogue. As I began sharing my own work, I sometimes hesitated, wondering if my perspectives aligned with his. Yet, true to his nurturing nature, he offered no criticism; instead, he carefully introduced new readings whose full significance emerged gradually. Our last conversation centred on an article I had written for *Asian Survey*, examining Sri Lanka’s turbulent years from 2022 to 2023. Inspired by W.B. Yeats, I had titled it, “Things Fall Apart—Can Sri Lanka Hold On?” His delight in this literary allusion was palpable. I promised to share the published version with him upon his return from the hospital—a promise that heartbreakingly remained unfulfilled.

Navigating this profound loss has reminded me of sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya’s poignant insight in *We, the Heartbroken* (2023) where she writes that grief “is a necessary component of the revolutionary imagination” (p. 4). Reflecting on Uncle Sudarshan’s passing, my sorrow gradually revealed itself not merely as personal mourning but as recognition of his profound intellectual legacy. Engaging with this grief has illuminated pathways of remembrance, underscoring how his enduring contributions transcend archaeological discoveries and scholarly publications. His legacy resides deeply in his inclusive vision of heritage as a living, unifying force capable of bridging divides. By embracing multiple narratives, he

offered an approach uniquely suited to addressing contemporary challenges of conflict and national identity. He passionately believed, and compellingly articulated, that “Heritage [is seen] as an idiom that expresses a common language of humanity, where people reach out to each other for understanding, sharing, and coexistence” (Seneviratne, 2007, para. 17). Yet perhaps his most significant achievement lies in demonstrating that the personal and the political—rigorous scholarship and active social engagement—need not exist in isolation. His life exemplified how scholarly inquiry could seamlessly intertwine with meaningful societal involvement. The Buddha statue he gifted me upon my initial departure from Sri Lanka—an elegant replica of an ancient artifact—symbolically embodies this harmonious integration of personal and professional realms, ancient tradition and contemporary experience. It has journeyed with me from New York to London, Delhi to Zürich, Vienna, and now Oxford, a tangible testament to our enduring bond.

In an era increasingly marred by divisive nationalism, Sudarshan Seneviratne’s vision of heritage as a powerful connector between communities remains profoundly relevant. His nuanced grasp of the interplay between heritage, education, and diplomacy continues to offer invaluable insights into contemporary challenges surrounding conflict and identity. His legacy gently compels us to transcend narrow boundaries, inviting recognition of the shared heritage that binds humanity. Even in his absence, his vision provides clarity, illuminating paths forward. Anne Carson, in *Nox* (2010), her elegiac reflection on her brother’s death, beautifully articulates our yearning for remembrance: “We want to be able to say, this is what he did, and here’s why...I wanted to fill my eulogy with light of all kinds” (p. 1.0). Similarly, reflecting on Uncle Sudarshan’s extraordinary life, I seek to fill this tribute with varied and abundant light. In doing so, I grasp more fully what he always understood—that our deepest personal relationships constitute profound acts of political imagination, capable of reshaping collective memory and guiding us toward a more empathetic and enlightened future.

Note: A longer version of this article originally appeared in the Daily FT, Sri Lanka, on January 18, 2025.

<https://www.ft.lk/columns/Remembering-Professor-Sudarshan-Seneviratne-1949-2024/4-771900>.

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